

The Literature behind Venezuelan Bolivarianism

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IN AN INTERVIEW with a Caracas newspaper in 2005, British historian Malcolm Deas claimed that “Bolivarianism is an ideology without content.”¹ Whether Deas is right or not, it is certainly difficult to say with any certainty what Bolivarianism really stands for, because it is full of contradictions and paradoxes. An examination of some of its key texts might help illuminate this vaguely articulated but much-contested political term.

Bolivarianism, as a coherent public concept, emerged during the presidency of General Eleazar López-Contreras (1936-1941), who tailored and promoted the concept, transforming it into an official doctrine designed to overcome the praetorian tyranny of the recently deceased strongman General Juan Vicente Gómez. During a notable speech, López-Contreras claimed that “Bolivarian ideals constitute the norm that inspires the government in all its acts.”²

According to one analyst, López-Contreras and his supporters created Bolivarianism to combat Bolshevism, which they saw as ideological, anti-patriotic, and tyrannical; in effect, Bolívar’s ideals were used to avoid situations of extreme political violence.³ Bourgeois Venezuela respected the 1936 constitution and laws of the State, but with the well-known military careerist Gómez as president, popular support existed for establishing Bolivarian groups to back the government. Meanwhile, the constitution outlawed socialism. Finally, because López and his followers were antisocialist, their version of Bolivarianism was politically to the right, or at least anti-leftist.

A more modern version of the Bolivarian phenomenon comes from retired Venezuelan Admiral Hernán Grüber-Odreman. In *Soldados Alerta!* (Soldiers, awake!), Grüber-Odreman uses Bolivarian principles to justify a Creole/Latin-American military aimed at fighting threats of extinction from

the United States, the World Bank, and the combination of globalization and neoliberalism.⁴ According to Grüber-Odreman, these threats provoke a Creole military response of the sort originally designed to combat Bolshevism. Other Venezuelan writers with military backgrounds, among them Army Captain Eliécer Otaiza and retired Air Force Lieutenant Colonel William Izarra, agree with the fundamentals of Grüber-Odreman’s arguments. They proffer a version of Bolivarianism common among retired military officers that clearly aligns with the current government’s thinking.⁵

Historian Tomás Straka refers back to López-Contreras’s concept of Bolivarianism and claims that “he who inherits the army of he who founded the nation . . . also inherits the right to found it [Bolivarianism].”⁶ This line of thinking permits us to better understand Grüber-Odreman. Bolivarianism appears to have taken on a praetorian nature. Without effective military support, so the thinking goes, it is simply impossible to advance left- or rightwing political plans.

The intellectual Heinz Dieterich, who is said to have “a Mexican soul, in spite of the German origins [of] his education and personality,” expresses the other (leftwing) extreme of the Bolivarian pendulum.⁷ In the radically socialist zeitgeist of contemporary Venezuela, Dieterich cites Bolivarianism’s particularly democratic character, insists the United States is the principal threat to Venezuela, and advocates an Ibero-American regional power bloc to avoid destabilization by globalization and neoliberalism. For Dieterich, Venezuela’s new manual, *Defensa Integral de la Nación* (The integral defense of the nation), marks the birth of the military doctrine of the Venezuelan revolution.⁸ Decidedly anti-U.S., the manual advocates the fusion of the army and people, who then function strategically as part of an integrated defense during asymmetric conflicts.

Academic Versus Political Bolivarianism

As historian Germán Carrera-Damas notes, academic analyses of Bolívar's philosophies explore the fundamental social-political strategies of the Liberator and explain how the Creole majority assimilated them and used them politically.⁹ The one common thread running through the analyses is the absence of any connection between Bolívar's philosophy and Venezuela's current political project. Academics who have looked at all the elections since 1998 see a contradiction between actual Bolivarian thought and the emphatic militancy of the Movimiento V República (MVR) (fifth republic movement), the chief political party in Venezuela today. These analysts contend that Bolivarianism merely "facilitates identification with the expression of patriotism which ratifies nationalist sentiments and helps to keep alive the image of perpetual mobilization."¹⁰ In other words, the MVR is using Bolivarianism cynically, to cement "the relationship between the people and militia or [to] create a civil-military alliance that sustains the most militant sectors of the MVR."¹¹

In his critically acclaimed article "Las Referencias Ideológicas del Movimiento Bolivariano Revolucionario-200 (MBR-200) y la Crisis Venezolana" (Ideological references of the Bolivarian revolutionary movement-200 and the Venezuelan crisis), Gonzalo Barrios-Ferrer shows how such longstanding characteristics of Venezuelan politics as messianic thought, the worship of force, and the politics of personality have migrated from the conspiratorial military group MBR-200 to its successor, the MVR.¹² According to Barrios-Ferrer, although the party claims to be Bolivarian and revolutionary, its charismatic leaders have clearly embraced old caudilloistic notions. In fact, both the MBR-200 and the MVR have consciously nurtured the worst of historic Creole legacy in order to seize political power. For Barrios-Ferrer, what now qualifies as Bolivarian thought is a spurious concoction, meant to gather the right and left wings under a nationalistic and, eventually, regional banner.

Leftwing Political Bolivarianism's Clientele

Given its origin in the MBR-200, it is easy to see why recently elected Venezuelan President Hugo

Chávez Frías's brand of Bolivarianism appeals to the right, but how has it seduced the left? One answer (Dieterich's nationalism) is corroborated by Darwin T. Pazmiño, who in 2003 wrote that his book *Soy Bolivariano: El Manifiesto de Lucha* (I am Bolivarian: a manifesto for fighting) was a manual for the political and social behavior of an authentically revolutionary Bolivarian.¹³ As delineated in the sidebar to this article, Pazmiño's slim volume—published, oddly, by the Caracas mayor's office—offers real insight into the left's attraction to Chávez's interpretation of Bolivarianism. The emotional, all-encompassing nationalism of Pazmiño's commandments is so frank as to be puerile. The true believer eats only national foods, listens only to national music, and accepts only national customs. He is a political activist, but one who wishes to be militantly obedient and promises not to deliberately venture out of the limits created by the authorities.

Unlike the academic Dieterich, Pazmiño preaches to the young, uneducated masses. In addition to the exacerbated nationalism that he prescribes, he also embraces the seemingly contradictory notion of pan-Andean nationalism (from Peru and Bolivia to Panama and Venezuela, including Colombia but excluding Chile, which represents the polar opposite of Bolivarianism, but nonetheless fits within Dieterich's theoretical National Power Bloc).¹⁴

Perhaps the biggest difference between the two branches of radical leftwing Bolivarianism is the way each regards Chávez, the self-declared "spiritual son" of Bolívar, the Liberator.¹⁵ Dieterich seems to accept Chávez as a legitimate leader. Pazmiño, on the other hand, clearly distinguishes between his own Bolivarianism and Chávez's dubious creation. However, Pazmiño does not preach subversion; rather, he tells his adherents to wait until Chavez's term is up to find a new leader.

Bolivarianism and Hemispheric Security

One might legitimately ask why the mayor's office of Caracas publishes books like Pazmiño's (and Dieterich's). Is publication part of a political quid pro quo for votes, or is it the result of individual initiative inside a complicit or slumbering bureaucracy? Another, more worrisome, possibility is that these books are part of a large political scheme created

by extreme leftwingers with regional designs. Led by experienced radicals, politically resentful locals, and politically active military personnel, these leftists have targeted the poor, young, and uneducated. Their strategy is to win local power first, then branch out regionally. The movement claims to be progressive and pan-Latin Americanist (think of Evo Morales's Movimiento Al Socialismo (MAS) (Movement toward socialism) in Bolivia; the Movimiento por la República Bolivariana del Ecuador (MRBE) (Movement for the Bolivarian Republic of Ecuador); or some radical Peruvian and Colombian groups), but its real agenda can be surmised from the titles of its publications, such as Dieterich's *Hugo Chávez: El Destino Superior de los Pueblos Latinoamericanos, Conversaciones con Heinz Dieterich* (Hugo Chávez: The higher destiny for the Latin American people, conversations with Heinz Dieterich) and *La Integración Militar del Bloque Regional de Poder Latinoamericano* (The military integration of the Latin American regional power bloc).¹⁶

Currently, it seems improbable that Venezuela's rejuvenated leftwing Bolivarianism presents a serious threat to the rest of Latin America. Even so, the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela collaborates logistically with Latin American radical groups in exchange for their spreading the ideas of Bolivarianism. Having lasted this long, the Bolivarian plan could have destabilizing effects in some democratic South American countries, especially in the Andean area (excluding Chile). The destabilizing capacity of Bolivarian radicalism lies in its effective, efficient, and productive propaganda in those countries and in the military sector in Venezuela proper.

To advance the left's radical political plan (under the veneer of democracy), the military must first be conditioned toward leftism. This process is well underway in Venezuela. One could see it in August 2004, when radical Bolivarians gambled on the movement's own future by orchestrating a referendum on Chávez's presidency. The referendum offered all the trappings of democracy without any real threat to Chávez.

More conditioning can be glimpsed in the work of retired general, ex-senator, and now political writer Alberto Müller-Rojas.¹⁷ Müller claims to see new threats to Venezuela's security, among them the possibility of internecine strife that would make Venezuela vulnerable to attack by reactionary

Colombian forces. He argues that Venezuela should adopt a "Switzerland strategy," strengthening its internal cohesion and esprit de corps and developing the technological capacity to ward off cybernetic threats as well as propagandistic news and communications from the outside. According to Müller, the threat level is high, the time to respond short: "We find ourselves in this shadowy zone that can either indicate the existence of very large threats, or hide them entirely."¹⁸ Of course, the visibility or obscurity of these threats depends on the formulation of Venezuela's new defense doctrine, whose basic aspects are being designed (behind closed doors) by Creole military specialists.

Security, Defense, and Development Legislation

If Chávez and the left are attempting to unify and mobilize Venezuela against perceived threats, they have already established or are in the process of establishing the legal and institutional bases to do so.

The constitution. Venezuela's defense policies are based on provisions codified in Title VII, De Seguridad de la Nación (On the security of the nation), in the *Constitución de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela* (Constitution of the Bolivarian republic of Venezuela).¹⁹ The topic of defense is constitutionally interwoven within security and national development. The Consejo de Defensa de la Nación (CODENA) (National Defense Board) is established through the Ley Orgánica de Seguridad de la Nación (Constitutional law on the security of the nation).²⁰

Under article 2, title VII, of the constitution, the symbiotic character of the nation's security principles (integral defense and integral development) stands out: "The security of the Nation is founded on integral development . . . within a participatory and continually advancing democratic system, free of threats to its survival [and] its sovereignty. . . ."²¹ Integral defense is then defined as "the joining of systems, methods, means, and actions of defense . . . which the State actively formulates, coordinates and executes [to safeguard] the independence, liberty, democracy, sovereignty, territorial integrity, and integral development of the nation."²²

Regarding integral development, the constitution says: "[T]he goals of this law consist in the execution of plans, programs, projects, and continual

processes of activities and labor that coincide with the State's general policy [to satisfy] the collective and individual needs of the population within its economic, social, political, cultural, geographic, environmental, and military framework."²³ Clearly, defense is an overriding concern of the Bolivarian Constitution, so much so that the government must address it in all policies, plans, and actions. In effect, the constitution provides the engine for state defense.

SECODENA. The constitution establishes a Secretariat-General of the National Defense Board (SECODENA) to act as the State's permanent authority for technical, research, and administrative support. The secretariat is beholden to the president, who nominates the secretary and can remove him at will. The SECODENA "fulfils the requirement of keeping the President and the rest of the board members informed of technical, research, and administrative activities. . . , [assists] the National Defense Board and the different committees that constitute it, [and] monitor[s] and track[s] the decisions made by the Board and its different constituent committees."²⁴

The president (Chávez) steers SECODENA's work via Interinstitutional Work Committees or Emergency Committees that continually monitor the nation's security situation and keep the president informed. To solidify his control over defense policies, the president is also the Commander and Chief of the National Armed Forces. As the supreme hierarchical authority, he decides which military officers are promoted to the ranks of colonel and naval captain and higher.

The strategic concept. The "Concepto Estratégico de la Nación en el Marco de la Constitución Bolivariana de Venezuela" (Strategic concept of the nation in the framework of the Bolivarian constitution of Venezuela) is a short but important document that refers to the otherwise inaccessible "Concepto Estratégico Nacional" (National strategic concept), written by policy analyst Ysabel Carrillo-Bolívar and published on SECODENA's Website.²⁵ The short document effectively explains what the "Concepto" says about national strategic planning with respect to security, development, and integral defense.

Among other issues, Carrillo details how the geopolitical and economic, cultural and social, environmental, and political domains, not just the

In Darwin T. Pazmiño's book *Soy Bolivariano: El Manifiesto de Luche* (I am Bolivarian: A manifesto for fighting), Heinz Dieterich defines a Bolivarian as "a new citizen, with a nationalist, republican, and Latin-American conscience . . . responsible for sustaining the Bolivarian revolutionary processes throughout his entire life." According to Dieterich, a Bolivarian possesses the following characteristics:

- His duty is to support the community.
- He is obligated to make himself into a pillar of his community.
- He must be the leader of his community.
- He must be the controller of his city.
- He must be the controller of the government.
- He must shape the rules of production cooperatives.
- He must shape the rules of consumer groups.
- He must shape the nature of television programs.
- He should belong to a Bolivarian group.
- He should belong to a Bolivarian social club.
- He is obligated to participate inside his community.
- He is obligated to participate in politics.
- He is a defender of Venezuelan musical traditions.
- He is a defender of Venezuelan culinary traditions.
- He is a defender of Venezuelan customs.
- He must demand a complete elementary, secondary, and university or technical education of quality.
- He must demand complete health care.
- He must demand honest government.
- He has the duty and is obligated to defend the Bolivarian Constitution of the Venezuelan Republic and all of its laws in order to create a country with an advanced social organization with a forward-looking democracy and a population mobilized to achieve national development.
- He cannot participate in antipatriotic groups.
- He cannot participate in divisionism.
- He cannot participate in anti-Venezuelan, foreign cultures.

military, are to be harnessed to the nation's strategic plan. Geopolitically and economically, the priorities are border policies and territorial development, which are meant to encourage the decentralizing of commercial activities and thus attend to regional needs. Culturally and socially, the national plan is to foster the growth of a unified, indivisible, multiethnic society. Environmentally speaking, the plan calls for guarding the nation's wealth while focusing international interest on the region's ecological potential.

The plan proposes the quantitative and qualitative strengthening of the military and favors a cooperative model of defense in a new regional and hemispheric situation. As it concerns international politics, the plan is pacifistic and rejects force as a means of resolving conflicts between nations. In the international economic sphere, the plan claims Venezuela will act in favor of a new worldwide economic reality founded on justice, cooperation, and equality. The plan calls for all Venezuelans to achieve "integral human development" within the country's borders while the government works internationally to promote human rights and put the "North" (the United States, for example) on the defensive. The absence of a definitive, published version of the National Strategic Concept obviously limits any analysis of the government's strategic thinking and illustrates the somewhat secretive, restricted nature of the security and defense discussion in Venezuela today.

LOFAN. Publishing "Ley Orgánica de la Fuerza Armada Nacional (LOFAN)" (Constitutional law of the armed forces) would also help fill in Bolivarianism's sketchy outlines. Although the law has yet to be clearly articulated by the Venezuelan legislature, the

National Assembly Webpage contains some reliable information about it.²⁶ Within the next few months we should expect to see a final version in force.

Analysis. The intent of Venezuela's current security, defense, and development legislation is difficult to ascertain with confidence. Some analysts believe that the literature points to a new version of praetorianism while others see a fundamental swing away from the liberal system and revolutionary integrity. Intellectuals like Dieterich write in favor of everything related to Venezuelan defense policies; others, like Aníbal Romero, claim that the government is "[accumulating] military power as a way to make Washington understand that the cost of any intervention in Venezuela will be very high."²⁷ On balance, the latest incarnation of Bolivarianism is nebulous and therefore not fully coherent, although some of its proponents' main aims, such as nationalism, Latin American regionalism, anti-Americanism, xenophobia, and the mobilization and militarization of Venezuelan society, are certainly clear.

As previously noted, Bolivarianism is a rather nebulous interpretation of Latin American reality, but one that provides an effective tool for drumming up support for radical political agendas. As the movement matures and produces a more substantive body of theoretical, legal, administrative, and political literature that clearly lays out aims and policies, it might become something quite different from the manipulative political construction it now appears to be. In the end, however, one must understand this about Venezuela and Latin America: That no matter how popular such radical agendas become, they can survive only if the military sector, for whatever reason, decides to support them. **MR**

NOTES

1. Malcolm Deas, interview by Alfredo Meza, *El Nacional* (Caracas), 16 January 2005, A-4.

2. "La palabra del Presidente de la República" (The word of the president of the republic), *Ahora*, 321 (17 December 1936): 6, cited in Luis Alfredo Rodríguez, "Bolivarismo y Anticomunismo en Venezuela (1936)" (Bolivarianism and anticommunism in Venezuela [1936]), *Tiempo y Espacio* (January-July 1986): 55.

3. *Ibid.*, 51-62.

4. Admiral Hernán Grüber-Odreman, *Soldados Alerta!* (Soldiers, Awake!) (Valencia-Caracas, Venezuela: Vadell Hermanos Editores, 2003), 41-50, 57-62.

5. See, for example, Alberto Garrido, *La Historia Secreta de la Revolución Bolivariana* (The secret history of the Bolivarian revolution) (Merida, Venezuela: Editorial Venezolana, 2000); "Retórica Bolivariana: Primer Ensayo Político" (Bolivarian rhetoric: first political experiment), *La Defensa* (Caracas: Autorimprensa Negrín Central, 2002); *En Busca de la Revolución* (Seeking the revolution) (Caracas: Autor-Producciones Karol, 2001).

6. "Guiados por Bolívar: López Contreras, bolivarianismo y pretorianismo en Venezuela" (Guided by Bolívar: López-Contreras, Bolivarianism, and praetorianism in Venezuela), *Tiempo y Espacio* (July-December 2003): 21.

7. Tarek William Saab, "Venezuela: Una epopeya latinoamericana" (A Latin American epic), in Dieterich, *Hugo Chávez: El destino superior de los pueblos latinoamericanos: Conversaciones con Heinz Dieterich* (The higher destiny for Latin-American people, conversations with Heinz Dieterich), ed. Heinz Dieterich (Caracas: Instituto Municipal de Publicaciones de la Alcaldía de Caracas, September 2004), vii; Heinz Dieterich, *Hugo Chávez: con Bolívar y el pueblo nace un nuevo proyecto latinoamericano* (Hugo Chavez: with Bolívar and the people, a new Latin-American project is born) (Buenos Aires: Editorial 21 SRL, 1999); Hugo Chávez and others, interview by Heinz Dieterich, "La cuarta vía al poder" (The fourth route to power), in Dieterich and Noam Chomsky (Buenos Aires: Editorial 21 SRL, 2000); Dieterich, *Bases de la Democracia Participativa* (Bases for democratic participation) (Buenos Aires: Editorial 21 SRL, 2001).

8. Dieterich, "La Página De Dieterich: Nace la Doctrina Militar de la Revolución Venezolana" (Dieterich page: The birth of military doctrine of the Venezuelan revolution), on-line at <www.rebellion.org/noticia.php?id=8990>, accessed 7 February 2006; Dieterich, *La Integración Militar del Bloque Regional de Poder Latinoamericano* (The military integration of the Latin American regional power bloc) (Caracas: Instituto Municipal de Publicaciones de la Alcaldía de Caracas, 2004).

9. Germán Carrera-Damas, *Culto a Bolívar* (The Bolívar cult) (Caracas: Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1973). See also Luis Castro Leiva, *De la Patria Boba a la Teología Bolivariana* (From being a foolish country to a Bolivarian paradise) (Caracas: Monte Ávila Editores, 1984); Yolanda Salas, Norma González-Viloria, and Ronny Velásquez, *Bolívar y la Historia en la Conciencia Popular* (Bolívar and history in the popular conscience) (Caracas: Universidad Simón Bolívar, 1987); Napoleón Franceschi, *El Culto a los Héroes y la Formación de la Nación Venezolana* (The hero cult and the formation of the Venezuelan nation) (Caracas: published by the author, 1999).

10. Valia Pereira Almao, "Movimiento Quinta República Vocación De Masas Y Atadura Personalista" (The Fifth Republic movement and the call to the masses and Atadura personalities), in *Los Partidos Políticos Venezolanos en el Siglo XXI* (Venezuela's political parties in the 21st century), ed. José Enrique Molina Vegas y Angel Eduardo Álvarez-Díaz (Valencia-Caracas, Venezuela: Vadell Hermanos Editores, 2004), 77.

11. Ibid.

12. Gonzalo Barrios-Ferrer, "Las referencias ideológicas del Movimiento Bolivariano Revolucionario-200 y la crisis venezolana" (Ideological references of the Bolivarian revolutionary movement-200 and the Venezuelan crisis), *Mundo Nuevo Revista de Estudios Latinoamericanos* (New World Magazine of Latin American studies) (January-June 1996): 27-62.

13. Darwin T. Pazmiño, *Soy Bolivariano: El manifiesto de lucha* (I am Bolivarian: a manifesto for fighting) (Caracas: Instituto Municipal de Publicaciones de la Alcaldía de Caracas, 2003).

14. Ibid., 20.

15. Dieterich, Hugo Chávez: *El destino superior de los pueblos latinoamericanos*:

Conversaciones con Heinz Dieterich (Hugo Chávez: The higher destiny of the Latin American people: conversations with Heinz Dieterich) (Caracas: Instituto Municipal de Publicaciones de la Alcaldía de Caracas, 2004), 1-2.

16. Dieterich, Hugo Chávez; Dieterich, *The Military integration*.

17. Alberto Müller Rojas, "Venezuela: un caso grave de inseguridad" (Venezuela: a grave case of insecurity), *Venezuela en Perspectiva* (Venezuela in perspective) (Caracas: Fondo Editorial Question, 2004), 99-129.

18. Ibid., 128.

19. *La Constitución de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela* (The constitution of the Bolivarian republic of Venezuela), Title VII, On the Security of the Nation).

20. Constitutional Law on the Security of the Nation.

21. Constitution, Title VII, National Security, Article 2, Venezuela constitutes itself as a democratic and social state.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.

25. Ysabel Carrillo Bolívar, "Concepto Estratégico de la Nación en el Marco de la Constitución de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela" (Strategic concept of the framework of the constitution of the Bolivarian republic of Venezuela), on-line at <www.codena.gov.ve/secodena.htm>, accessed 3 February 2005.

26. For more information, see Asamblea nacional de la Republica Bolivariana de Venezuela (The national assembly of the Bolivarian republic of Venezuela), on-line <www.asambleanacional.gov.ve>, accessed 14 March 2006.

27. Javier Pereira, "Cuestionan anuncios de cambios en doctrina de la Fan" (Changes in FAN doctrine are questioned), *El Nacional* (Caracas), 29 December 2004, A-2.

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MR Milestones

With this issue, we say goodbye to 2 colleagues and consummate professionals who, for the better part of 20 years, have invested heart and soul in *Military Review*: Mr. Dennis Giangreco, our visual information and graphics editor, who has been awarded a private contract to produce a single-volume history of the U.S. Army; and Ms. Vaughn Neeld, our supervisory editor, who will retire in May 2006 after 27 years of stellar government service, the last 10 here at the *Review*. Ms. Neeld's attention to detail, insistence on quality, and enormous appetite for work are legendary here at the journal. To Dennis and Vaughn, we wish nothing but the best in whatever life brings your way.